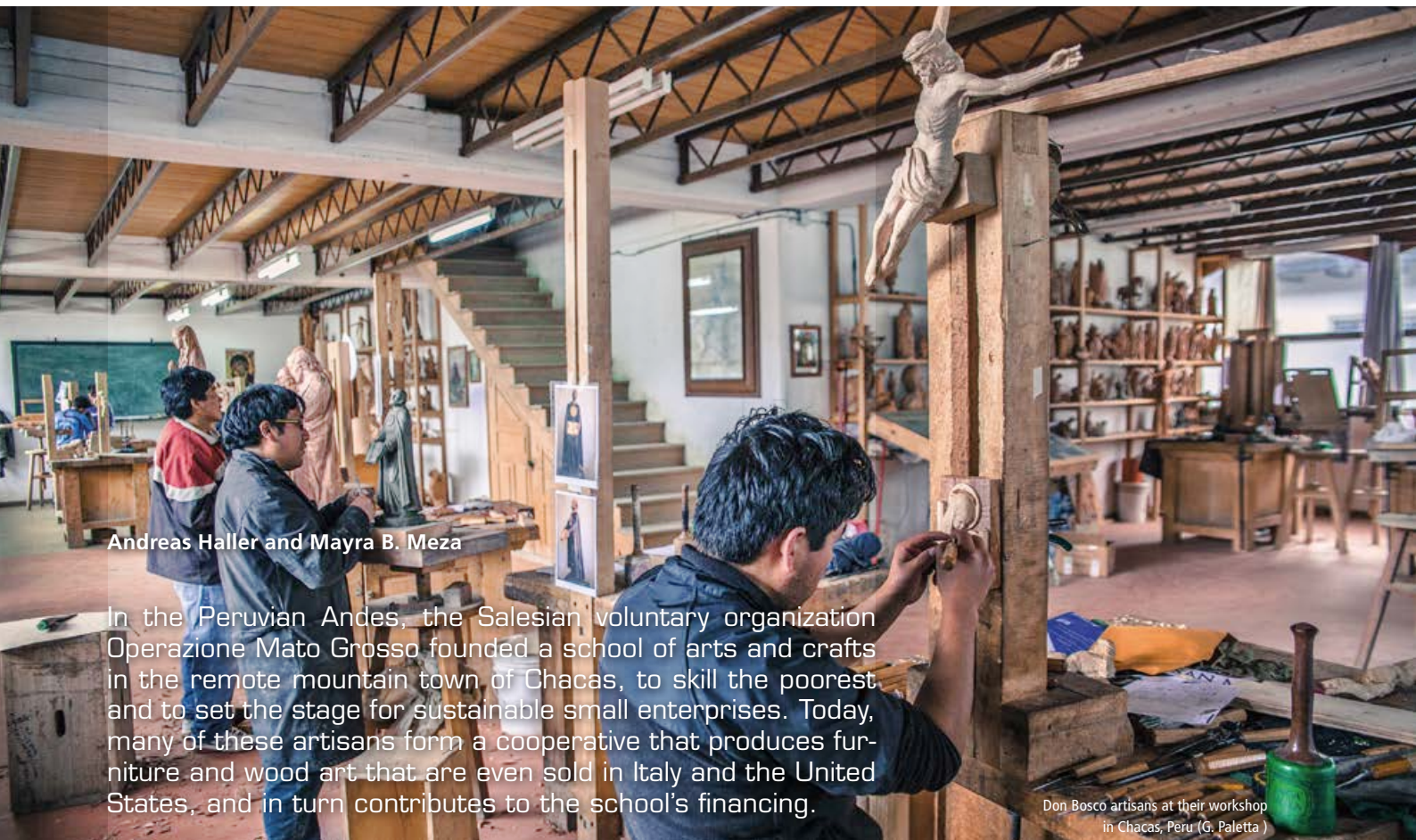


Artisans of the Andes: an economic and social success



Andreas Haller and Mayra B. Meza

In the Peruvian Andes, the Salesian voluntary organization Operazione Mato Grosso founded a school of arts and crafts in the remote mountain town of Chacas, to skill the poorest and to set the stage for sustainable small enterprises. Today, many of these artisans form a cooperative that produces furniture and wood art that are even sold in Italy and the United States, and in turn contributes to the school's financing.

Don Bosco artisans at their workshop in Chacas, Peru (G. Paletta)

Situated east of the Cordillera Blanca, the mountain town of Chacas has been transformed from a centre of poverty to a prospering focal point of Andean craftsmanship. In 1979, Operazione Mato Grosso (OMG) started to train young people as artisans – aiming at founding a locally based cooperative of craftsmen, and improving the local people's living conditions.



Pupils admitted to the five-year school of arts and crafts – initially 12, currently about 50 per year – are offered a full study grant including board and lodging. At the end of their training, the young artisans obtain a tool set that enables them to pursue their career – be it in Chacas or elsewhere. The project's financing is mainly based on the pillars of voluntary work (several Italians currently work as teachers or support administrative processes), donations and revenues generated through the sale of furniture and wood art in the Chacas-based cooperative. The cooperative Artesanos Don Bosco has about 650 members, who take orders via the cooperative's central administration; on average, an artisan can earn about twice the Peruvian minimum salary of PEN 750 (US\$ 235). Commissions come, among others, from Peruvian public entities, ecclesiastical authorities or international customers. Italy and the United States are the cooperative's most important foreign target markets: in 2014, they imported 38 percent and 33 percent of the cooperative's products, respectively, followed by Chile (18 percent), Togo (7 percent) and others. Artesanos Don Bosco has a share of about 3 percent in the total Peruvian wood furniture exports [1], and in Peru's Ancash region they already ranked 88th among all exporting enterprises in 2011, their exports reaching a value of US\$ 409 478 [2].

"When I was a child in the 1960s, some 50 years ago, young boys of the village were often forced to go to the coast for work, for instance to Chimbote or Lima. Thanks to the Italians this has changed. Now, our young chacasinos are becoming renowned artisans and their work is sold to foreign countries – imagine!"

Quote by a Chacas-born male interviewee

Lessons learned

- Development financing based on donations and voluntarism can be a fruitful alternative to traditional forms of investment, provided these initiatives are entrepreneurially managed and steered towards self-sufficiency.
- Cooperative forms of inclusive entrepreneurial initiatives, linking training and small-scale rural industries, are likely to trigger a more comprehensive economic development. This is particularly so if cooperative members forgo maximization of their personal incomes in favour of the cooperative's reinvestment in training for future generations.



Colonial-style buildings with restored, wood-carved balconies (A. Haller)

The project's funding is mostly donation-based and does not represent a form of classical investment, where investors aim at having a share in the profits. What makes this project sustainable is that the school and cooperative are being developed towards self-sufficient and thus future-proof institutions: not only by generating revenues from handicraft sales, but also by creating local human capital (for instance knowledge, skills or ability) to ensure the training of the next generation of artisans, who in turn contribute to the development of Chacas and its environs.

In the district of Chacas, the number of small enterprises belonging to the manufacturing sector had increased to 22 by 2008, with 14 of them founded after 1999 [3]. Since there are no other types of manufacturing in this rural district, the increase can largely be linked to the OMG initiatives, which apart from an economic and training focus also concentrate on health care. This doubtlessly contributed to the advancement of the Chacas district in the Human Development Index (HDI) ranking. According to UNDP [4] Chacas' HDI rank rose from 912th among all Peruvian districts in 2003 to 892nd in 2012. Positive effects are also visible in the village itself. Local artists, guided by OMG, have carefully restored wooden elements such as traditional balconies of the many colonial buildings that form a unique ensemble of outstanding historical value. Moreover, newly constructed buildings follow the existing building culture, and thus continue using wooden balconies, doors and windows as characteristic features. Chacas is gradually becoming a destination for individualist travellers who appreciate Andean nature and culture off the beaten track. For this reason, OMG has already started to train young locals as mountaineering guides, and to establish mountain huts in the Cordillera Blanca.



The artisans of the Peruvian Andes are passionate about their work (G. Paletta)

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